

AN EXECUTIVE BRIEFING

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP INTELLIGENCE | VOLUME 02

HOW WINNERS HIRE.

The Seven Principles That Determine Whether a Senior Hire Actually Works.

Observations from twenty-five years of advising boards, senior leaders, and investors on the decisions that determine whether a senior hire compounds, or quietly costs them the year.

KEN LUBIN

Managing Director · ZRG Partners

Founder, Executive Athletes · Creator, The Ultimate Hire

Written for senior leaders, boards, and private equity operators who want a candid, working system for hiring at the executive level, rather than a comfortable one.

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ THIS

Most hiring writing tells leaders what they want to hear.

This briefing does not.

Over the past twenty-five years, I have led thousands of executive searches and counseled hundreds of boards and senior leaders at moments of consequence. In nearly every case I can recall, the decisions that separated the senior hires that worked from the ones that did not were not strategic, financial, or operational. They were decisions about discipline.

Most companies have a strategy for the search. Few have a system for the hire. The brief is vague. The panel is misaligned. The story is told four different ways from four different chairs. The offer is delivered by email. The first ninety days are left to the new executive to navigate alone. And then, twelve months later, the company is surprised that the hire did not land.

The pattern is consistent. The companies that get the seven decisions in this briefing right tend to hire well, repeatedly. The ones that avoid them tend to confuse a search failure for a market problem. There is rarely a third outcome.

What follows is what I would tell you across the table over the course of ninety minutes. If even one of these observations lands the right way, it will save you a senior hire, and quite possibly the year that hire was meant to determine.

Read it slowly. The reflection at the end of each section matters more than the framework.

Ken Lubin
Managing Director, ZRG Partners

THE DIAGNOSTIC

Seven questions to sit with before reading further.

Answer them honestly. If you cannot, you already know which decision requires your attention first.

- 01** Could your hiring team answer, on a single page, what business outcome the next senior role exists to produce, and what would make the hire a clear win at twelve months?
 - 02** Has your interview panel ever met before the first interview to align on the scorecard, the lenses, and the story they will tell?
 - 03** Could every panel member articulate the same four-part story about the company (the moment, the thesis, the hard truth, the invitation) in their own voice?
 - 04** If a finalist were asked, in confidence, what they made of your process, would the answer make you proud, or would it surprise you?
 - 05** When did the last senior offer go out by email instead of by phone, and what was the actual reason it happened that way?
 - 06** Is the 30 / 60 / 90 review schedule on the calendar before day one of your next senior hire? Will it be held even if the executive appears to be performing well?
 - 07** How are the candidates you have declined in the last three years describing your company today?
-

"The companies that get all seven of these decisions right do not do so by accident. They do so by holding themselves to a standard of discipline most hiring teams are unwilling to attempt."

01

PRINCIPLE

Define the role before you define the search.

The clarity of your brief is the ceiling of the search. No search partner, however senior, can compensate for an unclear brief. Two hours of disciplined definition will save twelve months of regret.

THE PATTERN

The single most predictive variable in a senior search is the quality of the role definition before the search begins. When a search runs into trouble at week ten (slates that are not landing, candidates who decline second interviews, finalists who pass), the cause is almost never the search. It is the brief.

A vague brief produces a vague slate. The hiring team interprets the same résumé three different ways. Four months pass. The leadership void costs more than the search will.

THE FRAMEWORK · FOUR QUESTIONS OF ROLE DEFINITION

Every senior role can be defined on a single page if the hiring team can answer four questions with precision.

The Outcome	What specific business outcome does this role exist to produce? If the role disappeared from your organization, what outcome would be at risk? Measurable, not aspirational.
The Three	What are the three non-negotiable capabilities? Three. Not ten. The discipline of choosing three forces the conversation the hiring team needs to have.
The Unwritten	What is true about this role that is not in the job description? The unresolved tension, the difficult peer relationship, the founder dynamic. Tell the candidate now.
The Win	What would make this hire a clear win at twelve months? Specific, measurable outcomes that become the spine of the scorecard and the first ninety days.

THE HARD TRUTH

- Two hours of disciplined role definition with the four most affected people. One-page output.
- If you cannot answer the four questions in two hours, the brief is not ready, and no search firm can fix that for you.

- Defining the role around the moment, not the function, is the difference between a relevant slate and a generic one.
- Every senior search that recovered late is a search that should have spent the first two hours doing this.

REFLECTION

Could you and your panel write down, on a single page, the outcome, the three non-negotiables, the unwritten truth, and the twelve-month win for the next senior role you will hire? If not, what is keeping you from doing it this week?

02

PRINCIPLE

Align the panel before the candidate walks in.

A panel that has not met to align is a panel that hires by gut feel and calls it consensus. Forty-five minutes before the first interview is the highest-leverage forty-five minutes in the entire search.

THE PATTERN

Most interview panels meet once. They meet to debrief the candidate, after the interviews are over. By that point, the panel has already done the work the meeting was supposed to do, badly, in private, with no shared framework.

The companies that hire well meet twice. The second meeting is the debrief. The first meeting, the one most companies skip, is the alignment meeting.

THE FRAMEWORK · THE FORTY-FIVE-MINUTE ALIGNMENT MEETING

0 to 10 min	Shared language about why this role exists and the business outcome it produces.
10 to 20 min	Walk the scorecard. Confirm the three sections and the scoring instrument.
20 to 30 min	Assign interview lenses. Each panel member owns two to three dimensions, with specific evidence to look for.
30 to 40 min	Agree the four-part story. Same moment, same thesis, same hard truth, same invitation. Different voices.
40 to 45 min	Logistics. Debrief cadence. Scoring deadline. The written scoring submission rule, with no exceptions.

THE HARD TRUTH

- Every panel member completes the scorecard independently, in writing, before the panel meets to debrief. Anchoring is real, and independent written scoring is the structural protection.
- Same questions for every candidate at the same stage. Different stems make the comparison noise.
- Debrief by evidence, not impression. Walk the scorecard dimension by dimension. The question is not, what did you think. It is, what did you see.
- If the alignment meeting cannot happen, do not start the search. That is the signal.

REFLECTION

Has your interview panel ever held a forty-five-minute alignment meeting before the first interview? If not, what has the cost been across your last three senior searches?

03

PRINCIPLE

Tell one true story, from every chair.

Strong candidates do not join job descriptions. They join stories they believe, told by people they believe. The story is the same. The voice is different.

THE PATTERN

By the time a senior candidate is sitting across from you, they have already read the public materials. The website, the press, the funding announcements. None of it has told them what they actually need to know: what is true about working here, what the next eighteen months will require, and what kind of leader will thrive in your environment.

The most common failure mode in senior interviewing is not that the story is weak. It is that each interviewer tells a different one. The CEO emphasizes growth. The board chair emphasizes governance. The future peer emphasizes the team. The CHRO emphasizes culture. The candidate leaves with four impressions, none of them fully formed.

THE FRAMEWORK · THE FOUR-PART STORY

The Moment	Where is the company right now, and why does that make this a consequential moment to join? Specific. Current. Not a press release.
The Thesis	What does the leadership team believe is true about the market that not everyone agrees with? A contrarian view, held with evidence, that the leadership is acting on.
The Hard Truth	The honest constraint. The unresolved tension. The real difficulty inside the company. Candidates will not believe the story unless one of its parts is hard.
The Invitation	Why this role, and why this candidate specifically? What is the work that gets done here that they cannot do in their current role? The invitation is personal.

THE HARD TRUTH

- The four-part story is written down before the panel walks into the first interview. One page. Read by every panel member.
- Different voices, same story. The CEO tells it from the chair of the CEO. The board chair tells it from the chair of governance. The future peer tells it from the chair of the team.

- Candidates who walk away from offers most often cite a feeling that they were not being told the full picture. Candidates who say yes most often cite the moment a leader said something honest they did not have to say.

REFLECTION

Could every member of your interview panel articulate the same four-part story in their own voice? If you asked them this afternoon, would the four answers describe the same company?

04

PRINCIPLE

Treat the candidate experience as the offer.

The interview process is the highest-fidelity signal a finalist will ever get about your company. By the time the offer is delivered, they have already formed the decision.

THE PATTERN

Boards and senior leaders underestimate the candidate experience in nearly every search. They focus on the slate, the interviews, the compensation, the close. They believe the offer is the moment of decision. By the time the offer is extended, the finalist has been forming the decision for ten weeks, on the basis of every cadence, every email, every silence.

THE FRAMEWORK · FIVE SIGNALS FINALISTS ARE READING

Cadence	How long between the first interview and the second. Whether scheduled times are kept. The cadence of the process is the highest-fidelity signal of how your company actually operates.
Preparation	Whether the interviewer read the résumé. Whether the questions were specific to the candidate. Whether the panel seems to know the same things about the role.
Communication	Whether commitments to follow up are kept. Whether the candidate is told when the timeline shifts. Whether silence between rounds is shorter than two weeks.
Candor	Whether the leadership team tells the truth about the hard parts of the role. Whether the cultural tensions are acknowledged. Whether the financial picture is presented honestly.
Respect for Time	Whether the process is as efficient as it can be. Whether the candidate is briefed on who they are meeting, why, and what each interviewer is evaluating.

THE HARD TRUTH

- After every senior interview, the candidate hears from the company within forty-eight hours. Even if the message is, we are still evaluating, you will hear from us by Thursday.
- Decline the candidates you decline well. The market is small. Memory is long. The candidate you decline today is the reference you call tomorrow.
- The companies that win in competitive markets do not have better employer brands. They run better processes. That is the difference.

REFLECTION

If a finalist from your last senior search were asked, in confidence, what they made of your process, would the answer make you proud, or would it surprise you?

05

PRINCIPLE

Lead the offer. Do not delegate it.

The first call is the hiring leader's. The structure is articulated, not just the number. PDF-and-email offers lose finalists at a rate that should embarrass the leaders who extend them.

THE PATTERN

The offer call is the single highest-stakes conversation of the search. Done well, it converts ten weeks of process into a candidate who is excited, confident, and ready to come. Done poorly, it can lose a finalist the company has already spent a quarter of a million dollars to identify.

There is a way to do this. It is not complicated. It is just not delegated.

THE FRAMEWORK • THE FIVE RULES OF THE OFFER CALL

Senior Leader First	Not HR. Not the search firm. The senior leader making the hire. The signal is the message: this matters to the company, and it matters to me personally.
Structure	Articulate the philosophy, then the components, then the numbers. The candidate writes down logic, not just a figure.
Room to Consider	Give the candidate days, not hours. Engage the household. Pressure tactics signal that the company is concerned about losing the candidate.
Written Within 24h	Send a one-page written summary of the package within twenty-four hours of the verbal offer. Not the formal letter. The summary.
Stay Close	Weekly contact from the hiring leader through the start date. Counter-offers and competing offers are coming. Do not go silent after the signature.

THE HARD TRUTH

- The first call is the hiring leader's signature on the candidate's career. Treat it that way.
- Be honest about the parts of comp that have flexibility, and the parts that do not. Senior candidates read the signal as honesty, not weakness.
- Counter-offers from the current employer are coming. Senior executives who accept counter-offers leave within eighteen months at higher rates than those who do not. Remind them, without manipulating them.

REFLECTION

When the last senior offer went out from your company, did the most senior leader on the hire make the first call? If not, what was the actual reason it happened that way?

06

PRINCIPLE

Own the first ninety days as much as you owned the search.

The hire is not the event. The first ninety days are the event, and the company runs them. Every misalignment that ends a hire at month twelve was visible at month one.

THE PATTERN

There is a body of literature on what the new executive should do in the first ninety days. Less attention has been paid to what the company should do.

The new leader is the most exposed person in the company during their first ninety days. They do not yet have a team. They do not yet have institutional credibility. They do not yet know which battles to pick. The company's role in this period is not to step back. It is to step in.

THE FRAMEWORK · THREE THINGS THE COMPANY OWNS

Access	Pre-populate the calendar with the standing meetings the new executive should be in. Introduce them to the leaders they will need to influence. Make sure they have the data.
Air Cover	When the new executive makes a decision that some part of the organization resists, the hiring leader provides cover. This is the new leader. I have asked them to make these decisions. Engage them as the decision-maker.
Cadence	Weekly one-on-one with the hiring leader, set at the start, protected from being pushed. At least one substantive one-on-one with each board member in the first sixty days.

THE 30 / 60 / 90 REVIEW · HELD EVEN WHEN YOU DON'T WANT TO

The 30 / 60 / 90 review is the most underused tool in executive onboarding. The purpose is not to evaluate the new executive. The purpose is to surface alignments, misalignments, surprises, and constraints that both sides should be discussing in real time. Skipping the review does not protect the relationship. It defers the conversation that will eventually happen anyway, in a worse register.

THE HARD TRUTH

- Signs visible at day ninety: the executive has not built a coalition, has not made a substantive decision, direct reports are escalating around them, the hiring leader is still doing the work the new executive was hired to lead.

- The cost of acting early is small. The cost of acting late is the executive's career and the company's year.
- The mid-course conversation, held at month four, accelerates the recovery in the cases that are recoverable, and surfaces the truth in the cases that are not.

REFLECTION

Is the 30 / 60 / 90 review schedule on the calendar for your next senior hire, before day one? Will it be held even when the executive appears to be performing well?

07

PRINCIPLE

Treat the executive community as the long game it is.

The candidate you decline today is the candidate you call tomorrow. The market is small. Memory is long. The compounding is real, and it works in both directions.

THE PATTERN

Most senior searches will produce two to four strong candidates who do not get the offer. How those candidates are handled is one of the most consequential parts of the search, for reasons that have nothing to do with this hire.

The candidate you decline today is the candidate you call tomorrow about a different role. They are the reference you call about someone else next year. They are the person at the dinner who decides what your company is like to work for, in a conversation you will never hear.

The way a senior leader handles the decline call, and the exit when an exit is required, is read by every executive in their network. The compounding starts on day one.

THE FRAMEWORK · HOW COMPANIES TREAT THE LONG GAME

The Companies That Lose at the Long Game	The Companies That Win at the Long Game
Decline by template email, often weeks after the decision was made.	Decline by phone, often from the hiring leader, within days of the decision.
Treat the offer call as the end of the relationship.	Treat the offer call as the beginning, win or lose.
Avoid the difficult exit conversation when a hire fails.	Handle exits with severance, narrative, and a defined reference.
Operate as if the next search is unrelated to this one.	Operate as if every search is connected to every previous one.
Are surprised when their next senior search runs cold.	Run their next senior search with a network that already knows them.

THE HARD TRUTH

- The way you decline a strong candidate is read by every person they speak to over the next decade.
- The way you handle an exit, when an exit is required, is read by your board, your executive team, and the market.

- Compounding works in both directions. The companies that hire well in year ten are the companies that declined well in year five.

REFLECTION

How are the strong candidates you have declined in the last three years describing your company today? Would the description be one you would use yourself?

THE SYNTHESIS

Why these seven work as a system.

These are not seven independent decisions. They are seven expressions of the same underlying capacity: the capacity to treat hiring as the discipline it is, rather than the event most companies treat it as.

Principle 01 (define the role) sets the ceiling. Every other principle operates beneath it. A vague brief makes alignment impossible, makes the story incoherent, makes the scorecard meaningless, and makes the first ninety days a guessing exercise.

Principle 02 (align the panel) is what makes Principles 03 through 06 actually work. Without alignment, the story splinters, the candidate experience is uneven, the offer arrives from the wrong voice, and the launch has no shared baseline.

Principles 03 and 04 (story and experience) are the visible signal of everything beneath them. The candidate cannot read the brief, the scorecard, or the alignment meeting. They can read the story, and they can feel the experience.

Principles 05 and 06 (offer and launch) are where most companies stop paying attention. They are also where most senior hires are won or lost.

Principle 07 (the long game) is the compounding layer. The companies that get the first six right, repeatedly, year after year, build a reputation that does the search work for them, on the next one.

"The companies that hire the best executives are not the most prestigious or the highest paying. They are the most prepared, the most aligned, and the most decisive."

THE OPERATING CADENCE

What disciplined hiring teams actually do.

The teams that execute on these seven principles do not do so through willpower. They do so through cadence. They put the work on the calendar.

Before the Brief	Two hours on the four questions of role definition. One-page output. Held before any conversation with a search partner.
Before the Search	Forty-five-minute alignment meeting with the full panel. Scorecard confirmed. Lenses assigned. Story agreed on. Debrief cadence set.
Each Interview	Same questions for every candidate at the same stage. Independent written scoring within twenty-four hours. Forty-eight-hour follow-up to the candidate.
Each Debrief	Walk the scorecard dimension by dimension. Specific evidence over impression. Lowest and highest scorer speak first on each dimension.
At the Offer	The hiring leader makes the first call. Structure before number. Written summary within twenty-four hours. Household engaged where it matters.
Through the Start	Weekly contact from the hiring leader. Pre-reads. Executive offsite invitation. The household is included. The signature is not the end.
First Ninety Days	30 / 60 / 90 review on the calendar before day one. Weekly hiring leader one-on-one held without exception. Mid-course conversation at month four if the signs appear.
Always	Decline well. Exit well. Treat every candidate as someone you may call again. The market is small. Memory is long.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Hiring is leadership. Treat it that way.

The seven decisions that determine whether a senior hire works are not strategy decisions. They are leadership decisions, and they are almost always made (or avoided) in the quiet moments when nobody is watching.

In the two hours of role definition that get postponed. In the forty-five-minute alignment meeting that does not happen because the calendar is full. In the four-part story that nobody bothers to write down. In the candidate experience that drifts because nobody owns it. In the offer letter that goes out by email. In the 30 / 60 / 90 review that quietly slips off the calendar at month two.

The companies that get them right do not do so by accident. They do so by treating hiring with the same rigor they bring to a board meeting, a financing, or a strategic plan. They put the work on the calendar. They hold themselves to the standard. They make the next hire better than the last one.

That is the standard I hold myself to every day. It is the standard I bring to every search I run, every board I sit across from, every senior leader I advise. And it is the standard I would hold you to if we were sitting across the table right now.

"The question is not whether these seven decisions matter. The question is which one you are going to act on this week."

ABOUT KEN LUBIN

Ken Lubin

Managing Director · ZRG Partners

Ken Lubin is a leadership advisor and executive search strategist. He is Employee No. 1 and Managing Director at ZRG Partners, a top-ten global executive search firm, where he has spent twenty-five years counseling senior leaders, founders, and investors on the leadership decisions that determine company outcomes.

He is the founder of Executive Athletes, a community of more than 18,000 executives who compete at an elite level, and the creator of kenlubin.com a leadership intelligence platform for boards, founders, and senior leaders.

He advises leaders on three things: building the teams that win, leading at their personal peak, and ensuring their own career trajectory matches the company they are building.

kenlubin.com | linkedin.com/in/klubin

klubin@zrgpartners.com

K E N L U B I N | Z R G P A R T N E R S

© 2026 · Ken Lubin · All rights reserved